

Chapter 7

Kindergarten Comics: Young Children's Graphic Ideas About Curriculum and Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the utility and affordances of using a participative comics-making approach to researching with young children in an early learning context. It explores an approach to comics-making that was used during a project that investigated the use of comics research techniques with young children. The chapter begins by outlining some of the key literature regarding using visual methods and making comics with young children as research, most notably drawing on the work of Lynda Barry and Dr. Ebony Flowers. A description of the project is given, followed by a discussion of how children engaged with comics-making as a tool for inquiry. The author also describes ways that comics-making can support all aspects of the research process. The chapter focuses on several comics made by children and the author and shows how comics-making is a viable method for researching with young children.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore the use of comics as research with young children in an early learning context. During my doctoral studies, I discovered the comics research work of Lynda Barry, well-known cartoonist and author. I have long been a fan of her comics, avidly reading her syndicated strip *Ernie Pook's Comeek* and her other comics for many years. As I was beginning to design my own research project, I found her book *Syllabus* (2014b), a collection of comics ideas, activities, and techniques that Barry had been developing to use as tools for inquiry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is now Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Creativity in the Division of the Arts. Barry had been working with scientists, researchers, and students across the sciences and humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for several years, and taught courses using comics-making as a means for exploring ideas and making meaning. Having drawn since I was a child, and having some experience with

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the arts to build on, I was inspired by her techniques and began to study with Barry to integrate some of those techniques into my own research with children. I designed a pilot project to develop and test comics-making research methods with children, which became the foundation for the approach I used in my dissertation research.

Visual methods, particularly drawing, have long been considered a useful tool for data generation and interpretation with children (Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry, 2009; Jolley, 2010; Steele, 1998, 2011; Tay-Lim and Lim, 2013). Visual methods offer a variety of affordances when working with young children who may not yet have written-text fluency, and the prospect of generating knowledge with young children using comics was exciting. I wanted to explore these affordances and dynamics.

Two kindergarten classes in an independent school in Toronto, Ontario agreed to host me as I developed and tested comics-making research techniques with young children. I worked with the students in both classes for over 6 months. Over that time, comics proved to be a powerful method for research as well as for learning, storytelling, and knowledge generation in a kindergarten context. The children and I ended up using comics to explore some of the social-emotional development goals in the Ontario kindergarten curriculum document, *The Kindergarten Program* (Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), 2016). In addition to that inquiry, however, children showed on multiple occasions a range of different ways that comics and comics-making both demonstrated their existing knowledge and supported their new learning.

Children – and their experiences, perspectives, prior funds of knowledge, and capacities for deft participation in research – are often undervalued and perceived as not-yet-capable of contributing in meaningful ways to research. I believe much of this is due to dominant conceptualizations of childhood that imagine children as immature, unformed, and unreliable as well as a misguided over-reliance on forms of research participation that rely on written text literacies. In this chapter I explore some of the ways in which comics-making as a research approach – particularly when conducted as a participative and multimodal method of researching – aligns with strengths-based processes for engaging children in research and knowledge-generation.

Likewise, following Barry, I want to make it clear that artistic training is not required to use comics-making as a methodology in researching with children. Given that the approach I explore in this chapter is participative and process-focused, anyone who wants to can engage with these methods and still be doing comics-based research. Some facility with the conventions of comics-making is useful, but this approach to researching with children isn't focused on producing artifacts that meet an external measure of artistic merit, nor is it about producing professional quality comics. Instead, the goal is to approach comics-making as a democratic and inclusive way of exploring ideas.

I will first outline some of the key rationales regarding using drawings and comics with young children. I will then describe the pilot project and the comics-making process that the kindergarten students and I engaged in together, and describe the curricular exploration we undertook using comics. I will then draw on some of the comics made by children during the project to illustrate the utility of comics and comics-making for researching in early learning contexts, and the ways that comics-making is a powerful method for documenting young children's existing knowledge and scaffolding their developing skills across the domains of development.

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